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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the influence of Puritanism, Romanticism, and Rationalism on parenting styles in the United States, outlining the basic tenets of these philosophical movements and how the authors believe these tenets relate to popular notions of parenting. The doctrine that humankind is of an evil nature is seen to be a fundamental tenet of faith for the Puritan family; and the moral aspect of a child's personality is seen to occupy all the parent's attention. This view is heard in such phrases as "You are a bad boy." Rationalism can be characterized by an assumption that life and the universe are rational and there is a solution to every problem. Parents are seen to insist on academic skills and book learning and regard reason as the one significant human characteristic. Romantics have held the view that all people are to allow the child to find its inner voice untrammeled by the institutions of society. Romanticism emphasizes feeling and recognizes no finite limits to a child's capacities or to the parents' patience. Romanticism, however, sets no criteria for achievement of an adequate or livable human response. (Author/MS)

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THE INFLUENCE ON AMERICAN PARENTING STYLES OF PURITANISM, RATIONALISM AND ROMANTICISM

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The invention of the idea of childhood and the founding of the first settlements in the United States occur about the same time. Freed from the traditions of Europe, we in America have been more experimental and seen more changes in child-rearing patterns than almost any place else--which may explain, at least in part, why America is often described as a child-centered society.

It seems to us that we can better understand both the changes that have taken place and what we believe are still the dominant styles of parenting in this country if we know something about Puritanism, Rationalism, and Romanticism and how these philosophical movements relate to our popular notions about parenting. These three movements, so far, have had the greatest influences on American thought. They are still pervasive in our society. However, diffused by our social institutions, they generally appear in less rigorous, more benign and more variant forms than their originators might have intended. Of course, Puritanism, Rationalism, and Romanticism are comprehensive and complex systems of thought. For our purposes here, we want to consider only one pertinent feature of these systems--specifically, the notions they contain which have helped shape the American conceptions of what used to be called "human nature." More particularly, we want to demonstrate how these notions about human nature are intrinsic to certain parenting styles.

The first conception of "human nature" comes to us from the Puritans, who brought to America a traditional Christian dogma of "original sin" as interpreted by John Calvin. We might add that they brought it with a vengeance. Human beings, said the Puritans, were "totally depraved", that is, born inherently and absolutely evil. As Jonathan

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Edwards so charmingly put it to his congregation in the sermon, Sinners In The Hands of An Angry God:

> Were it not that so is the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear you one moment; for you are a burden to it; the creation groans with you; the creature is made subject to the bondage of your corruption, not willingly; the sun don't willingly shine upon you, to give you light to serve sin and Satan; the earth don't willingly yield her increase to satisfy your lusts, nor is it willingly a stage for your wickedness to be acted upon; the air don't willingly serve you for breath to maintain the flame of life in your vitals, while you spend your life in the service of God's enemies.

This doctrine of humankind's evil nature was a fundamental tenet of faith of the Puritan family and the first lesson taught to Puritan children when they learned their alphabet. The verse that accompanied the letter "a" in The New England Primer (1690-1830), for example, went as follows: "In Adam's Fall/We sinned all." Some of the other verses are equally instructive, as, for example: "The Idle Fool/Is whipt at school;" "Youth forward slips/Death soonest nips;" "Job feels the rod/Yet blesses God."

The Puritan view, then, of human nature as evil because it was in defiance of God and his commandments explains why it was the moral aspect of a child's personality that occupied all of their attention. All thought, all feeling, all behavior were judged as morally right or wrong. Almost nothing else mattered. Parent-child relationships were seen simply as another example of all relations between authority and others and, as authority figures, parents aimed primarily at the suppression of sinfulness, the control of the Devil within the child, and making the child a moral subject of the corporate Puritan community will. God, after all, had created that community to serve His purpose.

Overtones of this Puritan attitude toward authority and innately evil human nature can still be heard, it seems to us, when a parent says: "You're a bad boy." or "You'll make God unhappy." or "Wait until Daddy gets home." or "God is watching." This style

of parenting, we believe, is characterized by a reference to authority, usually male, and a tendency never to particularize the behavior that leads to the judgment of the child as bad. Further, positive judgments are rarely used and control of behavior is maintained through instilling fear.

The recent revival of the use of MacGuffey's readers, by the way, is significant evidence, to us, at least, that this style of parenting is still extant. MacGuffey texts, sectarian descendants of The New England Primer, salted with excerpts from The Bible, appear much more concerned with providing suitable moral examples to the young than with developing reading ability. Their present use seems aimed at an attempt to retain authoritarian Puritan parenting or to provide a moral panacea for the fear in many adults of future hippie movements or student riots. Your own perusal of these texts might well lead you to the same conclusion.

The second movement, Rationalism, comes out of the Enlightenment, and is, of course, the philosophical system espoused by most of our Founding Fathers. John Locke, in his An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, gives us the basic assumption of the Rationalists' position on "human nature" in the phrase tabula rasa--the "white paper" or "clean slate". The Enlightenment dismissed the Puritan emphasis on the primacy of the moral nature of humankind, believing that we were born neither good nor bad. It substituted, instead, a primary concern with reason, the acquisition of knowledge as the unique human trait. Jefferson, for example, wrote: "Read the Bible as you would read Livy and Tacitus. Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven..."

Originally, it is true, the rationalists advocated experience, the empirical method of learning. But as the amount of information snowballed over the last two hundred years, the acquisition of fact through rote learning has replaced individual empirical experience as the central method of knowing or understanding for most of us.

To use a metaphor, from the Rationalists' point of view, the child is an empty vessel with no predetermined traits of "human nature." Into this empty vessel, learning, especially scientific, mathematical and technological knowledge should be poured. It seems to us this viewpoint is expressed in parent comments such as: "Look it up in the encyclopedia;" "You ought to take algebra as preparation for good thinking in the adult world"; "Try it and see what happens". It is also found in those long, long explanations, those torrents of rationalization, given as answers by both parents and children when confronted with the "whys" of human existence. The rationalist parent frequently complains that the child "won't take no for an answer" and that the child must "have an explanation or logical reason given for everything."

These responses, it seems to us, are characterized by an assumption that life and the universe are rational and that there is a solution to every problem. There is also an insistence upon academic skills and "book-learning". Finally, the Rationalist parents' point of view seems to regard reason as the solely significant human characteristic. It's difficult for us to be critical of the Rationalist perspective not only because it is deeply entrenched in the American value system, but also because it is the cornerstone of the ethos of the achievement-oriented, professional, upper-middle class. The continuing concern with the three R's, the recent "our kids can't read" scare and the amount of money our society has spent on education in the natural sciences, are just three very good indicators of the powerful impact of Rationalism upon parenting, we believe.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the founder of Romanticism, despised the rationalist-mechanistic cosmos described by the Enlightenment philosophers. He told us, instead, that people were born good and that they were corrupted by the evils of civilization. He told us, further, that goodness resides in each of us, in our sentiments, that is, in our emotions and that our individual character, our genius, lay in nurturing these genuine feelings and expressing them.

The American version of Romanticism was, of course, Transcendentalism, and its chief proponents, Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, state its central themes quite clearly. We are tempted at this point to quote all of Emerson's essay, "Self-Reliance," with its ringing phrases as example. Indeed, the Romantic movement inspired so much magnificant belles-lettres that it's difficult to choose. Emerson will do: "Trust thyself. Every heart vibrates to that iron string." "Whose would be a man must be a non-conformist." "Infancy conforms to nobody; all conform to it." "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages." And, in a metaphor, it seems to us. Emerson gives the kernel of Romanticism:

> " Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage. He is ashamed before the blade of grass or the blowing rose. These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. Before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts; in the full-blown flower there is no more; in the leafless root there is no less. Its nature is satisfied and it satisfies nature in all moments alike. But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time."

How does the Romantic see the child? Again, quoting is irresistible. In Intimations of Immortality, Wordsworth tells us that we are born "trailing clouds of glory", and he calls the child the "eye among the blind." That child then, has an essential genius or "human nature" that it must be allowed to discover and express on its own. The attempt of Romantic parenting is to allow the child to find its inner voice, true soul or flash of genius untrammeled by the noxious institutions that constitute society.

It seems to us that the behavioral styles of parents associated with Romanticism are easily discernible. "How do you feel about it?" asks the parent of the child. Or, in response to a child's way of holding its body or moving "Isn't that just a perfect

thing." Or, "You'll always be my first love, by best baby." Or "All I expect of you is that you do the best you can and follow your own sentiments or heart." Or, in describing a child to another adult, "My child just grooves on (or is really into) painting (or dancing, or skating, or occultism, or whatever). Or, finally, the parent saying: "You hurt my feelings when you do that." This last expression is the lethal core of Romanticism in parenting. The expression establishes the supremacy of the parents' feelings and demands that the child experience his own feeling as the reciprocal of the parents'. It leads to fusion of child and parent and makes the separation of the two at later points in life extremely difficult. The comment, "You hurt my feelings when you do that" is, by the way, an excellent illustration of the Romantic paradox. Romantic heroes like Napoleon (or Hitler), examples of Nietzsche "Superman," demonstrate that in order to give free rein to one's own emotions, one has to suppress other people's.

It seems to us that the style of parenting derived from Romanticism has a number of characteristic features and makes a number of assumptions about "human nature." Obviously, it makes "feelings" the paramount criterion by which behavior between parents and children is judged. Also, the parent-child dyad come to a sense of their relationship as one in which there are no finite limits to the child's capacities or to the parents' patience or endurance. Finally, it sets no criteria for achievement of an adequate or livable human response. The child, therefore, never knows when its work has reached a desired level of excellence, when it may stop an interpersonal transaction as a "bad bet", or when it may invoke standards for behavior other than those expressed by the parents without feeling disloyal and cut adrift.

We have spent so much time on romanticism because it seems to be the most popular current fashion in America. It is also pervasive. Almost all drama in the mass media, for example, spread its gospel. Children are seen as innately developing toward goodness, hope, and positive feeling while parents are required to "keep up with it", "attempt to understand," "communicate fully and freely." Further, they are asked to believe and trust in their children without adequate ways to evaluate whether such trust is well or poorly placed.

In conclusion we would like to add that we hope the influence of evolutionary theory and its developmental conception of human behavior or "human nature" becomes more widely held. Until then, though, if forced to make a choice, we personally prefer the Rationalist style with a smidgen of Romanticism. How about you?